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AUTHOR Venditti, Phillip N.
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ABSTRACT

A perennial challenge for developmental educators is to upgrade students' skills over many years without losing their own sense of professional dedication and momentum. Two instructional techniques that can be of use to developmental educators in meeting this challenge are interactive errands and dialogue journals. These activities enable students to transfer classroom learning into the community; bring students' out-of-class knowledge to bear upon classroom interactions; break down students' academic, cultural, linguistic, and social barriers; and enhance instructors' feelings of self-worth. Interactive errands are assignments which require students to make contact with people outside of class, induce their contacts to perform some predetermined behavior, and analyze the encounters afterward with instructors and fellow students. Examples of interactive errands are "human bingo," which requires students to get signatures from people in the community who fit certain requirements; "team quests," which require students to find information about historic sites; and collecting and analyzing billboards, advertising slogans, and bumper stickers in terms of their cultural significance. Unlike other journals, dialogue journals are shuttled back and forth from student to teacher at regular intervals in a reciprocal process in which both instructor and student share feelings and ideas respectfully, individually, and repeatedly. Students are free to write as much as they please on any topic, knowing that their instructor will respond fully and individually. Both dialogue journals and interactive errands encourage frequent, genuine communication and are relevant to students' lives outside and inside the classroom. (Author/EJV)

Two Tools for Building the Competence of Developmental Students and the Confidence of Their Teachers

Phillip N. Venditti

Assistant to the President

Moraine Valley Community College

10900 S. 88th Avenue

Palos Hills, Illinois 60465

(312) 974-4300

Abstract

A taxing challenge for developmental educators is to strengthen students' skills over many years without losing their own professional dedication. Interactive errands and dialogue journals are introduced, explained, and shown to be of value to developmental educators in meeting this challenge. Interactive errands require students to initiate contacts and carry out meaningful tasks with members of the community. Dialogue journals, which differ from traditional "one-way" student journals by virtue of being reciprocal exchanges between equal participants, serve to build subject-matter skills and confidence among students while providing instructors with personal feedback to enhance their self-esteem and motivation.

Two Tools for Building the Competence of Developmental Students and the Confidence of Their Teachers

A perennial challenge for developmental educators is to upgrade students' skills over many years without losing their own sense of professional dedication and momentum. Interactive errands and dialogue journals can help tackle this challenge by enabling students to transfer classroom learning into the community; bringing students' out-of-class knowledge to bear upon classroom interactions; breaking down students' academic, cultural, linguistic, and social barriers; and enhancing instructors' feelings of self-worth.

Generating activities which encourage frequent, genuine communication with other people is part of the process developmental educators should engage in as they help their student acquire and upgrade their communicative competence (Paulston, 1974). Not only must these activities possess meaning in and of themselves, but they ought to be relevant to students' lives outside the classroom. Interactive errands and dialogue journals both meet this requirement.

Interactive Errands

Interactive errands are assignments which require students to make contact with people outside their own classes, induce those people to perform some predetermined behavior, and analyze their encounters afterward with instructors and fellow students. An interactive errand resembles a "field trip" in that it sends people in an organized way outside the classroom, but it differs from such a trip in that the responsibility and credit for its success lies with the student instead of the instructor.

Venditti and Bahruth (1986) coined the term "interactive errand" in their work with non-native English speakers. Their efforts were stimulated by the writings of

such authorities as Layfield (1981), who wrote that "Fitting formal education to the real life conditions reflected in the surrounding community is the basic challenge to education in a multi-cultural situation. This means including daily life situations in the classroom and getting the classroom out to experience life in the community" (p. 245; emphasis in the original.)

Interactive errands are particularly well-suited to ESL classrooms because they are experience-based and centered around the needs and problems of foreign-born students (Smith, 1980). Among the kinds of interactive errands employed by instructors of English as a second language to expose students to aspects of American language and culture have been the following:

- completing "human bingo" sheets (see Figure 1) which require them to get signatures from people in the community who fit certain requirements
- going on "team quests" to find information about historic sites
- asking strangers to define idiomatic expressions and write examples of how such expressions are used in context
- collecting and analyzing billboards, advertising slogans, bumper stickers, and other media which reflect features of the prevailing culture

These examples portray the value of interactive errands in multi-cultural settings. Instructors and students in any discipline, however, can concoct a variety of errands; possibilities are virtually limitless. Biology students can be asked to interview a veterinarian or doctor. Accounting students can be sent to the county courthouse for a

copy of biennial tax receipts. People in an upholstery class can talk with maintenance personnel about furniture wear in large public buildings.

Developmental education instructors can incorporate interactive errands into their classes. They might, for instance, call upon students to contact a journalist or other professional writer and observe that person in the act of actually producing prose, for instance. Or they might take a cue from instructors at Evans Community School in Los Angeles ("A Catalog," 1984), who sent their students once a week to the headquarters of a major West Coast bank to practice language skills with the bank's employees. What better ways than these to promote an interest in composition and drive home the important point that writing is a process, not just a product?

If handled skillfully, interactive errands may generate three major positive outcomes: 1) enabling students to gain facility and competence as initiators of communication; 2) helping members of the community develop a more positive image of the students and their educational milieu; and 3) helping students develop academic and personal confidence by demonstrating that educators other than their own instructors are friendly, accessible, and willing to offer them useful information.

Sequencing Interactive Errands

When they introduce their students to interactive errands for the first time, developmental educators should probably start close to home. An opportunity to role-play the errand within the classroom itself can be the first step, offering a safe haven for risk-taking in which new linguistic and social behaviors can be tried without fear of failure or embarrassment (Dobbs & Riback-Wilson, 1982).

Errands inside the school or college itself, such as trips to the learning resource center to look up small items, can then be assigned. Executing this kind of errand requires just a short time, and being able to operate within a familiar setting tends to

reassure students who normally avoid taking the initiative in educational contexts. After they have performed a set of on-campus errands, students may eventually be dispatched farther afield, either by themselves or in groups.

Dialogue Journals

The rationale and mechanics of journal-writing have been presented to developmental educators repeatedly over the past two decades. The way journals have generally been handled, however, is that students do most of the work. Instructors usually only correct mechanical errors or jot a few personal reactions in the margin, thereby neglecting the opportunity to respond "not so much to student writing but to student writers" (Zamel, 1985, p. 97).

Dialogue journals, by contrast, are shuttled back and forth at regular intervals--usually once a week or once every other week--in a reciprocal process whereby instructors and students alike share feelings and ideas respectfully, individually, and repeatedly. Whatever the subject they may be studying, students are free to write as much as they please about whatever they feel is worth discussing, knowing that their instructors will respond fully and individually.

Dialogue journals, thus, differ significantly from conventional "one-way" journals. They are truly equal exchanges between students and their instructors. Instead of acting primarily as judges of composition or factual correctness, instructors who use dialogue journals express themselves first and foremost as human beings.

Functions of Dialogue Journals

One obvious function of dialogue journals may be to reinforce and strengthen an ongoing series of interactive errands. In the pages of their journals, instructors can help students see beneath the surface features of errands; clear up misconceptions;

probe individual reactions; and ascertain how much energy students have invested in the errands and how much value they have derived from them.

In addition to being worthwhile as monitoring devices for interactive errands, dialogue journals provide a firm foundation for extending subject-matter assistance and personal counsel and guidance (Staton, 1980, and Anderson-Smith, 1986). As one of the author's Vietnamese students wrote at the end of a semester, "Dialogue journal was helping students in many ways. To me, it helped me improving in English and mental relived. For instance, whenever I had a questions or problems I couldn't solve in my mind. I wrote a Dialogue Journal, to you...to get an answers."

Because developmental students frequently hesitate to ask their instructors face-to-face questions or engage in classroom discussions with other students because they fear being considered "slow," dialogue journals are an ideal mechanism for revealing their real needs. In fact, many students have worked through formidable psychological problems in the pages of their dialogue journals over the course of a school term.

Time Considerations

Instructors may be reluctant to use interactive errands and dialogue journals with their students because they think doing so would take too much time. Indeed, these techniques do impose time requirements on both instructors and students. The average high school or community college instructor, whose teaching load encompasses five classes a week of 30 or more students per class, would scarcely have time for meals and sleep if he or she spent just 10 minutes a week writing responses to each student journal.

Several measures can be taken, however, to make the time commitment associated with dialogue journals bearable. Instructors can exchange journals with alternate halves or thirds of their classes so that their weekly load is lessened.

Students, particularly after they have become accustomed to how dialogue journals work, can be asked periodically to exchange entries with each other. Instructors may decide to exchange journals only with students they have singled out as having special needs or unusual potential.

One final time-saving method is for teachers to compose journal responses using a word processor. Software programs are available on the market which enable instructors to combine individualized comments with one or more uniform paragraphs, thus generating a substantial journal entry for each student (Sayers, 1986).

Competent Students, Confident Instructors

Ultimately, the benefits derived from interactive errands and dialogue journals more than compensate for the time required to carry them out. Because they embody sincere, reciprocal communication that encourages and reinforces human feelings, both methods induce involvement by developmental students in the educational process while transmitting information which is important in particular subject matter areas.

Students in several of the author's ESL classes have expressed satisfaction with dialogue journals. A Chinese woman wrote:

> Dialogue journal is a bridge between teacher and classmates; one can learn a lot from writing it. Writing a DJ is a good strategy to practice writing and also a good way to communicate with teacher and classmates. Moreover, one can enjoy the fun from receiving a 'feedback.'

The words of an Iranian student further suggest the value of dialogue journals:

> Writing dialogue journals help to write what we thinking and feeling. Sometime it's easier writing than saying. We can talk to each other without face to face. We

> can improve our English language by writing, dialogue journal is one of the best exercises. We have to write what we want to tell to the others, and establish communication with them.

Considerable research by Astin (1985) has substantiated a high positive correlation between students' involvement in the educational environment and their retention rates in schools and colleges across the nation. Interactive errands and dialogue journals by their very nature foster such involvement.

And as Gutstein, Peyton, and Staton (1986) wrote, it is not just students who need to feel meaningfully involved in educational activities. Instructors who deal with large numbers of students over a period of years frequently fall prey to stress, anxiety, and boredom. Kurtz (1980) identified nearly 50 articles in the professional literature which identified and analyzed these unfavorable by-products of instruction.

Ingram (1980) and Moe (1979) are among authorities who have inventoried techniques which educators may use to fight "burnout." Besides advocating relaxation training, conversations with friends, hobbies, exercise, and short-term "retreats," these authors recognized the value to instructors of using personal journals or diaries to express satisfaction and let out frustrations. But these and other writers have overlooked the possibility that instructors can participate in an exchange of journals with students.

By engaging in such an exchange on a regular basis in dialogue journals, instructors are apt to feel enhanced confidence and self-esteem. One teacher wrote of this benefit to herself and her fellow instructors:

> As working individuals, we also need this daily stimulation, this immediate feedback, to keep us fresh, vital,

> and to give us a deep sense of knowing that we are essential to the educational process...Taking the time for dialogue journals not only benefits my students; it serves to validate me as a teacher and learner. (Reed, 1986, p. 6)

The lasting salutary impacts of interactive errands and dialogue journal-writing experience can be impressive. An example: One community college instructor was surprised and gratified to find that a former student kept delivering dialogue journal entries to his office every Monday morning for a year after the completion of his original class (Bahruth, 1986). Surely this is a kind of reinforcement on which most veteran instructors could thrive!

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